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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses regional accreditation, a common form of institutional quality assurance, noting its application to distance education. Six core academic values sustain regional accreditation: institutional autonomy; collegiality and shared governance; faculty intellectual and academic authority; the degree; general education; and site-based education and a community of learning. Regional accreditation identifies these core values with institutional quality. Several regional accrediting commissions have addressed distance learning by accommodating distance learning initiatives within existing accrediting standards and developing distance learning guidelines for institutions. As currently configured, regional accreditation standards and the distance education guidelines tend to focus on similarities between site-based and distance education, which diverts attention from challenges that distance learning poses to each core academic value of accreditation. This paper examines challenges posed by distance learning to each of the six core values, offering a transitional framework for rethinking values and accreditation standards in response to each challenge. The framework highlights differences between distance and site-based learning. It calls for the recalibration of capacity and process standards to reflect the changing role of time and place in higher education delivery. However, it does not address the growing need for accreditors to pay additional attention to educational consequences. (SM)

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Introduction

A small set of core academic values is central to the history and tradition of higher education. Distance learning, however unintentionally, challenges these values, forcing reconsideration of their origins and the choices they represent. Whether it is offered through a traditional institution or through an alternative provider, distance learning introduces new and unfamiliar conditions and structures to the higher education environment—the faculty role is different, shared governance as we know it may be nonexistent, the library and other facilities may be accessible only electronically. The challenge of distance learning is an opportunity for both institutions and accreditors to rethink accepted academic values, their relationship to the achievement of quality, and their role in accreditation.

This paper focuses on regional accreditation as one of the oldest and most frequently used forms of institutional quality assurance in the United States. Perhaps to an even greater extent than national, specialized, or professional accreditation, regional accreditation addresses and has been shaped by core academic values.

The Foundation: Core Academic Values of Regional Accreditation

Six core academic values sustain regional accreditation. They are the valuing of:

- Institutional autonomy;
- Collegiality and shared governance;
- The intellectual and academic authority of faculty;
- The degree (whether associate, baccalaureate, professional, master's, or doctorate);
- General education; and

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- Site-based education and a community of learning.

Colleges and universities conduct their day-to-day business, develop strategic plans, generate operating budgets, and engage with students based on the perceived importance of these values. While the accreditation process allows considerable leeway in *how* these values are honored, the higher education community itself insists that the values be addressed.

Accordingly, regional accreditation protects these values. Over the years, standards and criteria have evolved that require the investment of institutional resources in them. Evidence of a lack of institutional commitment to even one of these values is cause for sanctions, from additional scrutiny of an institution to the withdrawal of accreditation. Any institution that fails to affirm its autonomy through a clear mission statement, fails to offer degrees, has not developed a viable shared governance structure, or has denied faculty control over curricula or standards would surely be cited in the course of an accreditation review. Accreditation standards also routinely require the maintenance of adequate campus facilities to sustain a community of learning, and call for a clear commitment to general education, consistent with institutional mission.

There are, of course, other reasons why an institution might receive sanctions in the course of an accreditation review—fiscal instability or an inability to meet the requirements of federal student aid programs, for example—but these are distinct from consideration of the core academic values identified above.

Regional accreditation explicitly identifies these core academic values with institutional quality. And in fact, for all our debates about what quality means and how to measure it, we rarely question *whether* these core values are indicators of quality. Many in the academic community would find it inconceivable that an institution lacking commitment to these values could be considered to provide a quality higher education environment.

The Challenge: Distance Learning Meets Core Academic Values

Distance learning is in many ways a welcome phenomenon, even as it is creating challenges for and arousing concern among many in the higher education community.

It holds enormous promise for enriching education, and focusing only on its negative aspects is a distortion. Distance learning is not an omnipotent force, responsible for all the current discomforts of higher education. Rather, distance learning needs to be considered in the context of other changes affecting higher education, such as the

growing role of market considerations and increased accountability pressures from the government and the public. This is the case whether we are considering distance learning offerings from nontraditional providers or distance learning offerings within traditional institutions. Efforts to paint distance learning as an evil to be opposed at all costs—or for that matter, as a cause to be championed against the establishment at any price—are likely to be unsuccessful.

To date, the eight regional accrediting commissions have addressed the challenge of distance learning primarily by accommodating distance learning initiatives within existing accrediting standards. The regional commissions have also developed a set of distance learning guidelines for institutions, which are used as a supplement to the accreditation standards or criteria that each commission already has in place. These guidelines, established in 1997, have been acknowledged by all regional commissions and build on principles articulated by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in 1996.

As currently configured, regional accreditation standards and the regional distance learning guidelines tend to focus on the similarities between site-based education and electronically-based education, paying less attention to the differences between the two approaches to teaching and learning. However inadvertently, the standards and guidelines may minimize those differences as they accommodate distance learning within existing accreditation standards.

Accommodating distance learning in this manner tends, however, to divert attention from the challenge that distance learning poses to each of the core academic values of accreditation. That basic academic values are being challenged does not mean they will be eclipsed. Nor should it be assumed that "good" values are being threatened by "bad" values. The core academic values identified in this essay are part of the evolving history and tradition of higher education. The challenge of distance learning forces us to reconsider their origins and the preferences they embody. This challenge represents an opportunity for both institutions and accreditors to rethink traditional academic values, their relationship to quality, and their role in accreditation.

CORE ACADEMIC VALUES	CHALLENGED BY
Institutional autonomy	Consortial arrangements
Collegiality and shared governance	Dispersion of faculty and students
Intellectual authority of faculty	Commercial courseware, standardized courses, part-time faculty, disaggregation of faculty responsibilities
Degree	Competition from credentials: reduced dominance of degree-granting
General education	Pervasiveness of training
Site-based education	The diminishing importance of place

Core Value 1

Institutional autonomy is a primary characteristic of American higher education, reflecting the early predominance of private colleges and universities and the traditional independence of such institutions from government control. In fact, for much of its history, higher education has been a private enterprise; only since World War II has public higher education come to dominate enrollments and play a major social role. Even as public higher education has radically expanded, however, institutions have remained faithful to the origins of the higher education system, insisting on independence from government. Institutional autonomy has a significant academic dimension not unlike the academic freedom of faculty: Just as institutions perceive themselves to be independent from government, faculty are independent of intellectual restrictions on their teaching and research.

This autonomy is critical for institutions, like colleges and universities, that serve complex public interests. The independent stewardship provided by governing boards of higher education institutions is a bulwark against both political influence and the impact of market considerations, when those are at odds with the public interest.

Challenge 1

Distance learning challenges institutional autonomy by encouraging institutional groupings, such as electronically-driven consortia, that require individual institutions to emphasize their similarity to others in the group rather than their uniqueness. Such groupings can also place constraints on the freedom of institutions to address their specific purposes and public interest considerations. The growing volume and diversity of transfer activity also challenges institutional autonomy,

requiring college and university administrators to rely more heavily on the validity of students' educational experiences outside their own institutions.

In fact, distance learning inherently questions the need for institutions at all—as technology trumps institutional and other boundaries of all kinds, including state, regional, and national borders. Indeed, some argue that distance learning will "de-institutionalize" higher education, making traditional institutions entirely unnecessary in a world of online educational service

Core Value 2

Collegiality and shared governance refers to a style of decision-making that stresses optimum participation and consultation among administrators, faculty, students, and staff—especially administrators and faculty. This value was originally conceived in terms of single-campus institutions, where all of the relevant constituents are associated with a single site. Over the years, the collegial model has been expanded to include multi-campus colleges and multi-institutional systems, with the resulting emergence of college-wide and system-wide academic senates and student governments.

Challenge 2

Distance learning challenges collegiality and shared governance by dispersing faculty, students, and administrators across an even greater number of sites and by increasing the use of part-time faculty. When full-time faculty are no longer tied to a single campus or system, when more faculty are part-time, when students enroll from locations all over the world, and when administrators are "virtual," the result may be diminished participation in shared governance processes.

Core Value 3

Faculty intellectual and academic authority has traditionally been defined as faculty responsibility for curriculum and academic standards, typically exercised through academic departments. According to this value, faculty should determine course content and expectations of student performance and personally act on these determinations in their classrooms.

Challenge 3

Distance learning is challenging this intimate relationship among faculty, curriculum, and standards through its reliance on commercial courseware, standardized courseware, and online examinations of student performance. The result is a decoupling of curriculum and academic expectations from individual faculty members—a

disaggregation of faculty authority and responsibility as we have come to know them. The dispersion of faculty across many institutions, noted above as a challenge to collegiality and shared governance, also contributes to this decoupling, as does expanded use of part-time faculty, unless such faculty are fully integrated into academic departments at several colleges and universities.

Distance learning also provides alternative models for the relationship between an academic institution and its faculty. Employment conditions that do not include tenure challenge the premise that a lifetime economic relationship is necessary to protect the intellectual and academic authority of the faculty.

Core Value 4

The degree is the primary means by which higher education organizes the educational experience at the two-year (associate degree), four-year (baccalaureate), and graduate (first professional, master's, and doctoral) levels. Even at degree-granting higher education institutions in which degree acquisition is not the norm (such as many community colleges), the degree is still extremely influential in establishing curricular requirements.

Challenge 4

Distance learning challenges the degree in two ways. It helps to increase competition from other forms of credentialing (e.g., certificates of training) and it provides powerful technological assistance to entrepreneurial new degree providers, operating outside the bounds of traditional higher education. In the first instance, distance learning has demonstrated that it is a particularly effective vehicle for the delivery of credentials upon completion of short-term, highly focused educational programs, including many offered by the corporate sector. Such credentials are emerging as an alternative to the degree as an organizing principle for the educational experience.

Second, while colleges and universities have traditionally been the primary providers of degrees, distance learning technology enables new providers to establish "modem universities" that are nimble at designing degree programs and obtaining the authority to grant degrees. Degree-granting programs are now available from virtual institutions and some corporate universities. By enabling the rapid establishment of new degree providers, distance learning challenges the dominance that traditional institutions have had over degree granting. And little is known about the effectiveness of online degree delivery when it comes to providing the equivalent of a traditional baccalaureate experience that encompasses both general education and a major or professional concentration.

Core Value 5

General education has traditionally been the primary means by which colleges and universities fulfill their responsibility to educate students at the broadest level. It is how the higher education community ensures that college is more than education for work. A typical general education curriculum addresses the goals of education for citizenship and social responsibility, education for social and cultural understanding, and education for life. It stresses intellectual development for continued learning. General education is usually tied to degree acquisition; while some general education experiences can occur in other contexts, the ideal is still a coherent curriculum by which all the general education goals are met.

Challenge 5

Distance learning challenges general education (long an endangered aspect of higher education in any case) by strengthening and contributing to an overall educational trend toward training and episodic learning (part-time, stop-in/stop-out education). Distance learning did not create this trend, but it is helping to make the trend more pervasive. The ready availability of online training and its immediate rewards in the workplace compete with notions of a more thorough general education that requires more time and, perhaps, patience.

Core Value 6

Site-based education and a community of learning. The notion of the campus as the locus of a community of learning is another product of higher education's history and development. We have long valued the opportunity for thoughtful reflection and intellectual stimulation that the campus setting provides. Higher education cherishes the ideal of a community of peers that engages in learning pursuits and is set apart from day-to-day concerns. While increasing numbers of students today are part-time and unable to take full advantage of the resources of residential education, even they enjoy some of its benefits, such as libraries, student clubs and organizations, and athletics.

Challenge 6

Distance learning challenges site-based education by creating virtual institutions and by relying on the World Wide Web and telephone lines for educational delivery, rather than on lecture halls and dormitories. Can the benefits generally associated with a physical site for learning be so easily dismissed? Or can electronically-delivered education replicate the benefits of site-based education? Many are concerned that the answers to these questions will be "no."

Consortial arrangements that complicate institutional autonomy, new forms of decision making, a changing role for faculty, credentials as

alternatives to the degree, diminished attention to general education, virtual institutions that compete with site-based education—all of these challenges are posed by distance learning. No wonder so many observers are anxious and apprehensive.

The Transition: A Framework for Rethinking Values and Accreditation Standards

What are appropriate regional accreditation responses to these challenges? Can we maintain our current approach, relying on standards that protect the core academic values and de-emphasize how distance learning differs from site-based learning? How do we do insist on core values and still take astute advantage of the stunning capacity of the technology that drives distance learning? Are we willing to entertain changes in how we think about academic values? If so, how much?

A framework for transition—for addressing the challenge of distance learning by attending carefully to the differences between distance learning and site-based learning—can help regional accreditors support and promote that which is best in traditional higher education as well as that which is most promising in the world of emerging technology.

Four principles can serve as the foundation for this transitional framework:

- Maintaining the core academic values is important to higher education;
- The *purpose* of each of the core values should govern our response to change;
- Distance learning is a change that is worth accommodating;
- Defining and enhancing the intersection of core academic values and distance learning can be a key strategy for meeting distance learning challenges.

The principles are useful for review both of traditional institutions with burgeoning distance learning programs and of new distance learning providers. They will be valuable for the review of programs and degrees that rely on a combination of technology-based and site-based education experiences—perhaps the most likely application of technology to teaching and learning in the foreseeable future.

VALUE	PURPOSE	CHALLENGE	TRANSITION STRATEGY
Institutional autonomy	Independence and identity	Retain while risking	Strategic coupling
Collegiality	Participation	Sustain participation	Electronic participation
Faculty	Academic stewardship	Sustain the authority	Redefine the authority
Degree	Organizing	Clarify role of degree and distinguish from credentials	Decide when to use each
General education	Social, civic, life education	Sustain and expand	Advocacy
Site-based education	Community of learning	Create community without place	Identify added value of place

Institutional Autonomy
Transition Strategy 1: Define an appropriate balance between preserving institutional identity and undertaking cooperative initiatives.

The purpose of institutional autonomy is to sustain the political independence and intellectual identity of a college or university. Autonomy as independence is a political and legal construct that reflects the history of higher education and is not challenged by distance learning. But autonomy as intellectual and academic identity is challenged by the growing emphasis that distance learning places on consortial and other types of group arrangements.

Accreditors can work with institutional leaders to think through what participation in electronic consortia means for academic standards, curriculum, course, and program requirements. Together, they can determine at what point consortial engagement begins to undermine institutional identity.

Collegiality and Shared Governance

Transition Strategy 2: Expand electronic participation strategies.

At its core, the purpose of collegiality is participation in decision making. Distance learning creates the need to expand participation because it brings in more and more constituents by electronic means. For example, if a virtual university employs faculty from five institutions, a collegial governance structure should be developed to accommodate them. Accreditation standards can be a means of encouraging the creation of virtual academic and student senates. Senate meetings can be held electronically, as can elections; chat rooms and instant messaging are available for virtual debates, and list servs can disseminate information.

Intellectual and Academic Authority of Faculty
Transition Strategy 3: Alter, but do not abandon, the stewardship role of faculty.

The purpose of faculty authority is to provide stewardship for curriculum and standards, and mentorship for students. Distance learning's growing reliance on commercial and standardized courseware that has been developed outside the academy requires us to redefine stewardship, as does the availability of online courses developed by our own departmental colleagues. Accreditation standards can be a catalyst for encouraging faculty to sustain their authority by creating online courses themselves; establishing rules for the use of courseware developed by others that are analogous to rules for the use of text material; and evaluating the effectiveness of standardized courseware in contributing to student learning. In other words, faculty can continue to play a stewardship role by making electronic tools work for them.

The mentorship role of faculty is undercut by the more limited contact with students that can result from reliance on online education. In this context too, appropriate accreditation standards can encourage faculty to ensure that adequate face-to-face contact is part of the distance learning experience and to participate actively in online conversations and exchanges.

The Degree
Transition Strategy 4: Maintain the essential features of the degree when it is offered in an electronically-delivered mode.

The purpose of the degree is to organize educational experiences and establish academic expectations. There are two transition tasks here, and appropriate accreditation standards can promote their exploration. First, we need a recommitment to the degree as an important organizing principle for educational experience. The added value of the degree, compared to other credentials, is its provision of a

comprehensive educational experience that includes general education, a major, and education for a profession. Credentialing typically addresses only professional education needs.

Second, we need to proceed carefully when designing a quality higher education experience that culminates in a degree for a distance learning environment. This is particularly critical with respect to the associate and baccalaureate degrees. There are two dangers to be avoided here: failing to distinguish between the degree and a training experience, and failing to ensure that all the major elements of the degree (general education, the major, and the professions) are present in an electronic environment.

General Education
Transition Strategy 5: Remember and articulate its importance; renew the advocacy.

The purpose of general education is education for social responsibility, civic participation, and ongoing learning. There are few new arguments in support of general education. This does not mean, however, that it has lost its value. Accreditation standards can encourage us to make these tested arguments with renewed force. We need energetic, not reluctant, advocates.

In addition to stimulating advocacy, accreditation standards can encourage the development of successful protocols for electronically-delivered general education, if this can be done well. Without general education, we likely lose education for social understanding and responsibility, education for civic participation, and education for ongoing learning.

Site-based Education and a Community of Learning
Transition Strategy 6: Determine the added value of site.

The purpose of site-based education is to create a physical and intellectual environment that supports student learning. Site-based education promotes student-faculty contact, reinforces peer influence, and provides a sense of "place" in which concentration on learning is paramount. Creating a physical site for education is one way to create community.

Accreditors and institutional leaders need to think through the precise ways in which physical community supports learning; examine what actually happens in an electronic community; and determine what types of communities are most appropriate for different kinds of students. What do we want to accomplish in a site-based environment, and can and should this be replicated in an electronic environment? Already there is evidence that online education provides a form of community,

but little information is available about how such a virtual community compares with a traditional site-based community.

The Next Step: The Framework Is Not Enough—Distinguishing Capacity from Consequences in Accreditation Review

The transition framework described here builds on accreditation standards as they are currently conceived—that is, as ways of examining institutional capacity and process (how large is the faculty, what is the governance process, does a general education program exist, etc.). In other words, the framework calls for the recalibration of capacity and process standards to reflect the changing roles of time and place in higher education delivery. In this sense, the framework is incomplete. It does not address the growing need for accreditors to pay additional attention to educational consequences as well as institutional capacity and process.

The larger task before us is not only to move from capacity and process standards that address physical space to capacity and process standards that address cyberspace; it is to develop standards that address consequences—outcomes, results, competencies—in physical space *or* cyberspace.

Taking this next step will involve establishing evidence profiles for the success of institutional efforts; developing competency-based accreditation reviews; and creating outcomes measures of student achievement. These tasks call for the development of institutional performance indicators that describe desired results in the areas of student learning, research, and service. An increased emphasis on competencies will require paying more attention to what students learn than how they learn it.

A Final Note

Accreditation standards and reviews can be instrumental in exploring the relationship between the core academic values of regional accreditation and distance learning. They can help us affirm the purposes our core values serve, and they can help us determine whether and how we can fulfill those purposes while taking advantage of the new capacities that distance learning provides.

Will accommodating distance learning in this manner destroy core academic values? If we are careful to honor the purpose associated with each of these values, we will not destroy them. In each case, as we modify standards to accommodate distance learning, we need to ask: "Are we sustaining the purpose that this core academic value embodies?" In modifying our governance standards, for example, to

accommodate collegiality that is electronically mediated, have we sacrificed *meaningful* participation? Such questions must be asked about all of the core academic values. We will not lose those values—if we ask the right questions about their preservation.

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